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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how school administrators are discovering the use of multimedia as a vehicle for school public relations programs. It describes the effective use of electronic presentations as a method to persuade and influence a broad-based school constituency in gaining their commitment for support of a community-based school program. Multimedia represents a formal, professional approach to connecting with the community. The major sections of the paper cover the following topics: (1) looking at multimedia usage--the novice's perspective; (2) advantages and disadvantages of using multimedia; (3) promoting the concept of a community-based school; (4) the school administrator as a public relations point person; (5) novices' success and easy use of multimedia; and (6) a reflection on the design process. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/MES)

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School Principals As Multimedia Novices: A New Path To Public Relations Presentations

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how school administrators are discovering the use of multimedia as a vehicle for school public relations programs. It describes the effective use of electronic presentations as one method to persuade and influence a broad-based school constituency in gaining their commitment for support of a community-based school program. Multimedia represents a formal, professional approach to connecting with the community!

Introduction

Gaining broad-based community commitment for the establishment and maintenance of support for school-based programs represents one of the on-going multi-faceted tasks of school administrators. Throughout the 1990's, these tasks have become even more daunting since not only is the audience make-up quite different from the usual school public, but the manner in which this audience receives and remembers information is through a totally different type of media exposure. Differentiated texts, fast-track media images, and swirling waves of sound effects all combine to bring a variety of messages to the public mainly through television and videos. In view of the competition of media images from different sources, the school administrator needs to implement a new approach to communicate the school's programs to its public. No longer will the simple verbal presentation with accompanying overhead transparencies be sufficiently effective. Therefore, with the assistance of school and district technology coordinators and computer literate teachers, school administrators are starting to use multimedia devices as a public relations vehicle for communication by using new technological resources to engage audience attention.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how school administrators can utilize a multimedia presentation to gain both new and expanded commitment from a broad-based school constituency to support the school's program. It represents the theme of the 1997 International Visual Literacy Association Conference in using technology to "connect with the community." The actual multimedia presentation is entitled "Heralding the Community-Based School: A Community Communications Project." This article will first describe the effectiveness of multimedia as a vehicle to present information to audiences and the advantages and disadvantages of novice usage of this medium. Secondly, a description of the actual public relations presentation with referenced literature supporting the rationale for the school program will be offered. The final section concentrates on the numerous decisions that novices will have to consider in successfully using this medium as a form of communication and the nuances apparent in constructing a viable presentation.

Looking at Multimedia Usage: The Novice's Perspective

Since the focus of the presentation is to achieve community commitment to school programs, it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of the use of multi-media presentations as a desirable communication vehicle. The objective of this public relations presentation is to demonstrate how an educational, cultural, and recreational program of a community-based elementary school in an impoverished urban area may be communicated to the diverse populations of the broader community. Its purpose is to inform parent groups, funding agencies, business representatives, and university personnel of types of programs which serve students, parents, and community members to gain both internal and external involvement, commitment, and financial support for continuation and expansion of school related programs. Communicating both the factual and affective aspects of the program involve reliance on media techniques capable of engaging a diverse audience.

A multimedia approach to public relations may be viewed as a public information campaign with the objective of persuading the audience towards a particular action (Reid, 1993). This type of approach can be useful in disseminating information by informing, persuading, and/or motivating people. Attainment of these objectives

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are augmented if the media is complemented by "interpersonal communication" which can play a primary role in promoting the involvement of the audience (Reid, 1993, p. 177). However, the message, presented as a "Show and Sell" concept, must have a clearly defined purpose and make good use of available visual techniques (Cunningham, 1993, p.55). To optimize understanding of the message, presenters must be able to integrate tools and materials to create a successful visual communication between the media and the audience (Cunningham, 1993). It is the richness of the visual image that assists in audience understanding and appreciation which leads to successful receptivity of the message (Tiemens, 1993).

First, multimedia can be defined as the use of any combination of numerous hardware, software, and projection devices (Cunningham, 1993). It may similarly be viewed as "the integration, control, and manipulation of texts, art and graphics, photography, animation, audio, and video for presentations" (Kupsh, 1995, p.38). The multimedia combination used in this presentation consists of: a Macintosh laptop computer, Microsoft PowerPoint and Photoshop software, Macintosh scanner, and video projector with computer connections.

Some Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Multimedia

Audience reception and retention of information constitutes a primary concern in communicating messages. In investigating the use of multimedia for public relations presentations, these concerns may be examined in terms of the advantages and disadvantages for the program designers and the audience. There are numerous advantages to using a multimedia presentation. Foremost, it supports a formal, professional presentations style. The technical nature of the medium will be impressive in meeting the expectations of an especially diverse audience. Visuals can be designed to present large amounts of data and information in comprehensible formats (Griffin, et al., 1995). For the presenter, the medium permits a new level of comfort in a variety of areas. First of all, presenting visual images using a laptop computer, Proxima, and a wireless mouse provide the presenter with freedom of movement while interacting with the audience. Secondly, multimedia has an advantage over the use of overhead transparencies in conserving the time needed to continuously change transparencies during the presentation, subsequently promoting the flow of verbal explanations without interruptions. In creating the visual program, the presenter enjoys the ease of Microsoft software, such as PowerPoint, which allows for the personalization of program formats or the use of a variety of templates. Once the presenter is trained, the use of scanners, Photoshop, and PowerPoint for text, graphics, and photographs lessens design time. Today's visual designer has no concept of the intricacies and arduous work involved in past attempts at creating electronic presentations; all the newer devices facilitate designs and consume less time in processing and preparation (Griffin, et al., 1995). The hardware necessary for presentations now "permit[s] 'idiot proof' connections between the computer and the display device" (Griffin, et al., 1996, p.440). In addition, seminar rooms or auditoriums may only need dimmers during projection times since a totally darkened room is not essential for viewing.

The few disadvantages certainly do not outweigh the positive aspects of using this medium. The foremost disadvantage is the cost of the equipment, both computers and projectors. However, with numerous school districts creating technology laboratories with updated equipment and trained personnel, the costs to individual educators is much less. Many individual school educators use laptop computers for a variety of reasons e.g., scheduling, school data management, etc. However, scanners and projectors are more widely found in the technology laboratories of secondary schools or district computer centers. For the individual school administrator using the hardware off-site, the portability of most electronic display devices is still viewed as problematic in their weight and size. But newer lightweight models will soon become less expensive as demand increases. One final disadvantage is the possibility of the failure of the equipment to function for any variety of reasons since occasional hardware compatibility problems may occur. Most presenters who use this combination of multimedia possess a fear of technical failure and prepare backup sets of overhead transparencies "just in case" (Griffin, et al., 1996, p.440). "Some of the former technological barriers have been removed through new improvements in computer hardware, ...software" and projector devices; more of the later models are constructed to provide a successful presentation with minimum or no technical failure (Knupfer, 1993, p.83).

Promoting the Concept Of A Community-Based School

Throughout educational settings, people sometimes exist in an organizational setting without a complete awareness of its real definition and meaning. Such is the disposition of the numerous factions of the broad-based school constituency which support the program at this community-based school. Many of the participants function in ways that have led to its creation without knowledge or comprehension of the school's program as a replication of a successful community program started in New Haven, Connecticut, approximately two decades ago. The model replicated is that of James Comer's concept of the school as the center of community activity (Comer, et al., 1996). A community-based school is one wherein services are provided beyond the regular educational program of the school to involve students, parents, and community members. Therefore, this presentation is designed to provide an understanding of those components which combine to foster a community-based school and to elicit new and continued support in the maintenance of the program.

The Comer model involves all participants of the community in life-long learning for both adults and children. It combines education, cultural activities, medical, and mental health agencies into a community project through which all members of neighborhood can avail themselves of the services offered. Model components align with the thinking of Dewey (1916) whose philosophy promulgates the concept of the perpetuation of democratic society through continuous community interaction, shared values and concerns, etc., all of which center around the education of the young.

Current replications of the community-based school expand the original definition by including other components. Schools and school districts sponsoring this program are broadening the concept to focus on developing a full-day "educational program for school age children by providing additional after school programs", making school facilities available to community members during late afternoon and evening hours, "serving as a distribution point for education and health community services, and helping to develop community councils that allow community members to identify and solve common problems" (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992, p.68). More recent models feature the use of the elementary school as the community location since its attendance area serves as a recognized hub of the neighborhood. The school principal usually assumes leadership in coordinating the various facets of activities which constitute components of the model (Sergiovanni, 1994).

A total community-based school program is comprised of a broad-based constituency which provides services to support the educational, cultural, and recreational program of the students, their parents, and community members. This elementary school's program includes a variety of components, some of which are supported though grants from various sources, school business partnerships, and university related activities. For example, a Mathematics/Science Eisenhower grant provides after-school tutorial services for students at risk; tutors include fifth grade higher achievers, honor students from the neighborhood high school, and parents. Two parent groups offer service to the school: the Home and School Association and the Parents' Corner Group. These two parent groups conduct programs for students, parents, and community members which consist of (1) a Summer Tutorial and Recreational program for Students (with teacher and parent volunteers), (2) daily volunteer services in classrooms, library, and lunchroom, (3) assistance in computer labs, (4) General Education Diploma programs for parents and community members, and (5) workshops for parents, such as 'Parenting Skills', 'Assisting Children with Homework', 'Daily Living Need', 'Child Abuse', 'Substance Abuse', and 'Health Care', etc. (Workshops are presented by teachers, the school nurse, and outside public and private agency representatives.) The school also has an evening recreational program for students, parents, and community members. A basketball, soccer, and recreational program under the aegis of the Recreation Department of the City of Philadelphia serves students and community members in the evening. Two universities and one college (St. Joseph's University, Villanova University, and Haverford College) have students serving practica in education, sociology, and psychology at the school; these students provide tutorial, mentor, and recreational programs for at-risk students during and after the school day. The school has various programs which provide for interaction with senior citizens in the neighborhood which range from holiday shows and dinners, to field trip participation. In addition to establishing

mentor relationships for young at-risk boys, school-business partnerships ,provide student, parent, and volunteer recognition programs yearly. The school is more than an educational institution; it is a center for caring, social bonding, and community cohesiveness which contributes to the personal and academic growth of the school's students, their parents, and community members (Wehlage et al., 1989, Hass, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1994).

The School Administrator as "P. R." Point Person

The institutionalization of a community-based school depends a great deal on the interpersonal and organizational skills of the school administrator who is responsible for coordinating all program model components. Developing parental and community involvement constitutes a challenging administrative task which requires designing different ways of communicating both school accomplishments and school needs to a broad-based constituency. Encouraging people to pledge their commitment to creating and maintaining a community-based school necessitates special approaches. The use of technology as a means of communication through visual literacy represents an effective way to accomplish the school's goals. Since the element of time constitutes a most valuable component of administrative work, school principals usually pursue the quickest manner for presenting ideas to their school constituencies to initiate new programs or maintain functioning ones. However, the availability of user friendly capabilities of today's multimedia computer programs enable busy school administrators to design first-rate presentations utilizing a minimum amount of time once the basic techniques are acquired. In addition, computer literate school faculty members may assist administrators in designing presentations.

Novices Can Successfully and Easily Use Multimedia

There are numerous components for designing a visual presentation which require training and knowledge for the school administrator to successfully complete a multimedia presentation. First of all, outlining the verbal presentation and determining the topic headings and sub-headings to use as visual images in introducing important facts constitute an important step in the process. Developing appropriate use of title bars and status lines to enable viewers to conceive of "units of thoughts rather than guess at the relationship of the title bar to subsequent slide frames" is important (Knupfer, 1993, p.90). Centered bold headings and subheadings assist the viewer in visually following the general flow of the message. Subsequent text information relevant to those headings permits the presenter to maintain progressive disclosure augmented by explanatory or descriptive formats and audience handouts. Since the purpose of using visual text is to maintaining audience attention and comprehension of specific concepts, the visual text should be simply phrased to highlight main ideas (Carney, 1992). Title bars, spacing, use of bullets, and text characters per line are also elements to be taken into account in the total design (Knupfer, 1993).

According to one researcher, the objective of designing a good presentation is to "provide an environment favorable to influencing the audience subliminally" (Carney, 1992, p.73). Selection of a good screen design, either personally devised, or chosen from templates, should be consistent throughout the presentation format to contribute to the desired environment and provide clear visual text. Carney (1992) claims that achieving a harmonious integration of the various "elements of a presentation is critical to its being perceived as well organized and coherent" (p.73). Selection of basic master templates for slides (with repetitive elements), in appropriate colors can assist in promoting subliminal messages through visual harmony and continuity. Background colors consisting of neutral blues and grays rather than pinks and reds appear to be the most desirable since 'red groups' have a tendency to "bleed". The color of a text font set against the selected background color may result in more or less appeal if not carefully chosen. Fonts, color combinations, and selection of clip art or graphics should be consistent with the emotional context desired to be emitted and in keeping with the topic, for example, sophisticated versus casual, energetic versus formal, etc. Experimentation with font selections, point size, density, and combinations of upper and lower case characters is necessary for legibility as exemplified in the avoidance of the total use of capital letters with the exception of limited use in the title bar. It is essential that the presentation designer work toward creating an aesthetically pleasing mixture of text, font, color, and graphics to communicate

an informative and persuasive message (Knupfer, 1993).

Visual images, in the form of photographs, assist the interpretation of the message: they add "power...by providing an emotional element that is beyond that of other communication strategies" (Knupfer, 1993, p.94). Preparation of photos to be added to text is no longer a time consuming task; scanners and Photoshop software enable more rapid cropping, photo touch ups, outlining (framing in highlighted colors), and screen transfers. 'Pictures convey a thousand words' only if they are well related to textual themes and portray the dynamics desired by the presenter. The same approach is recommended for the use of special techniques such as 'wipe-ups' 'panning' etc.; a few special effects lend a touch of 'magic' however too many prove to be distracting. The initial review of the entire presentation using a projection device on a larger screen may present some surprises to the novice. It may be necessary to use menu tools on the projection device or computer software to adjust color schemes and photos for clearer visuals. A few final considerations for adjustments constitute examination of presentation length (a recommended 20 minutes), type of seminar room, and audience size.

A Reflection on the Design Process

This multimedia project, which was designed by a former school administrator, demonstrated the use of the techniques discussed above. The first-hand experience served as a model to calculate both ease of learning and project completion time. The use of visual text to sell the audience on the value of maintaining the program necessitated consideration of the impact of font, color, point, spacing, and most important of all, text content. The work involved in inserting framed photographs highlighting the accomplishments of students, teachers, parents, thus demonstrating the successful programs provided by all the supporting external agencies was well worth the effort. The affective nature of associated themes and pictures served to increase audience enthusiasm and participation.

Summary

Formulating the project from initiation to completion involves careful planning to minimize time usage in the preparation of the presentation. Since administrative time is at a premium, portions of design tasks can be delegated to a technology coordinator or computer literate teacher. However, with adequate training and the appropriate equipment, most administrators will desire to engage in creating multimedia presentations themselves since the process is less time consuming than in the past. By creating their own presentations, administrators can personally convey specific messages highlighting focal points of the school program.

Burke (1992), in relating the usefulness of this medium as a good public relations tool, notes that "when visual communication captures our attention, we are as drawn and involved in the communicative relationship as is a prospective customer" (p. 106, in Reid, 1993). Using a multimedia approach to school-based public relations is gaining popularity among many school administrators; it represents the acknowledgment of a new vehicle capable of emitting powerful messages to the public. Multimedia represents a dynamic new way to connect with the community!

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